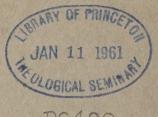
Harold S. Bender

Biblical Revelation and Inspiration

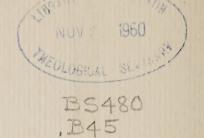
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By Harold S. Bender



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BIBLICAL REVELATION AND INSPIRATION

By Harold S. Bender

I. THE BIBLE AS A UNIQUE REDEMPTIVE BOOK

There is a book which we Christians call the Book of Life. It is a book with a "strange and wonderful power to lead men of every race and condition into a living relationship with the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." When we read it with an open mind and heart, we discover that God has long been seeking us, to deliver us from our evil world of misery and bondage and to enter into fellowship with us; that for centuries He spoke urgent words of invitation through the prophets whom He sent, and that at last He came to us in a Son. We discover that eternal life can begin here and now—when we forsake our foolish ways and commit ourselves and our all to this Jesus who is called Christ.

As we accept His lordship and follow Him, and seek to obey His new commandment of love, we find that a heavenly light begins to transfigure this dark world in which we dwell; all things become new. As we go forth in the name of our Lord "to preach glad tidings to the poor," "to proclaim release to the captives," and "to set at liberty those who are oppressed," we tread on celestial ground.

Life which was meaningless and empty, however much it contained of the material and cultural goods of this life, now is lifted to the heights of "heavenly places in Christ Jesus," and we become colaborers with the God of the universe.

In other words, this book which we read becomes a redemptive book, "able to make . . . [men] wise unto salvation . . . in Christ Jesus" (II Timothy 3:15). Its continuing hold upon men, such as no other book has ever had, is solely because of this saving character. While its literary quality and historical value are also great, its chief value is as a redemptive book; it is the book of life. This book is our Bible, the Holy Scriptures, the Word of God.

There is no other book of life. The Bible picture of man as a sinner in rebellion against God, and of that very God working redemptively in history to deliver him from his sin and rebellion, is found nowhere else. The way of salvation becomes known to men only through the Bible. Without it, man in his weakness, inability, and sin cannot understand himself, or his world, or his fellows. In himself he is a lost soul in a lost world. Only when he discovers that from outside of himself he is comprehended and his needs are met, and when he can therefore base his faith and understanding on this outside source, which is God, does he find the answer to his insoluble problems and needs.

When this answer comes, and it does come through the witness of Holy Scripture and the church of Christ, he knows that there is a God, that this God knows all about man and is concerned for him, that He loves him and makes Himself, His nature, and His will known to man, and that He does this through Christ. This is a revelation to him, for of himself he cannot know it. No other book brings this revelation; it is the Bible alone. The Bible is the book of revelation.

Because the Bible "brings men to Christ, builds them up in Christ, and sends them out for Christ," the church has always confessed that which the Bible claims for itself, that it is an inspired book, that it is of God, and that it brings God's revelation of saving truth. This claim is completely defensible. This claim the Mennonite Church fully accepts; this claim the Biblical Seminary in which I serve accepts, as I am sure our other schools do; this claim I also accept with all my heart.*

II. THE MEANING OF REVELATION

As we speak of revelation in connection with the Bible, it is necessary that we know clearly of what we speak. By revelation we mean the whole self-disclosure of God to man, whatever forms that disclosure may assume. This activity of God began with the creation, and is found to a limited and partial extent in nature.

But revelation is primarily historical; that is, it has taken place within the realm of human experience in events which actually happened in time and space, upon this earth. This historical self-disclosure of God came to special focus and power in the unique historical events of divine deliverance occurring in His dealings with the chosen people from Abraham to Christ. It was climaxed in the incarnation, life, teachings, atonement,

^{*}I owe much of the wording of this introductory section, including the quotations, to E. P. Blair's The Bible and You.

and resurrection of Jesus Christ, who was the supreme and only full self-disclosure of God.

Revelation is also Scriptural. God's historic special saving acts, including the incarnate Christ, were paralleled and followed by revealed interpretations of these acts, which were vouchsafed by the Spirit of God to chosen prophets and apostles. These interpretations were first often given orally, in both Old and New Testament times, but were finally written down in inspired Scripture. Thus God's revealing activity includes acts, interpretations, and in its final stage the writing of Scripture, Scripture in which the right meaning of saving history is given trustworthy expression. Without this assurance of the right understanding of salvation history, we would still be in our human darkness and lostness. But the light of His own holy Word shines upon the pathway of salvation and lights all our pilgrimage.

From this written Word, the Bible, the church has throughout the ages drawn its testimony, drawing out "treasures new and old." Whenever the Bible has been lost, ignored, dethroned, or withheld, it has inevitably been superseded by human experience and reason or ecclesiastical authority, with a consequent perversion of the Gospel and Christian truth.

There are ultimately only three basic options in the matter of authority in faith and life: the Bible (Protestantism including Anabaptism), the church (Catholicism), or man's reason or experience (rationalism, liberalism, humanism). Acceptance of either churchly authority or man's reason as supreme has always meant loss for the Gospel of Christ. The great Christian renewals, beginning with the Protestant Reformation, have come

from a rediscovery of the Scripture and its message, with a restoration of the Bible to its rightful place of authority.

The Anabaptist-Mennonite movement also had its origin in an immediate appropriation of the Word of God, even beyond the understanding of the reformers in its vision of the church and its mission of discipleship, and of a living ethic of love. "You give me Zwingli's word; give me God's word," said a Zurich Anabaptist in 1525.

Thus revelation is both historical and Scriptural.

But revelation is also personal. Since the purpose of God's revealing activity is redemptive, that is, to bring men back to Himself, the ultimate destination of all revelation is the mind and heart of the individual person who is to be saved. Paul spoke of this when he said, "It pleased God . . . to reveal his Son in me." Now some twist this essential truth into a theological statement that says there is no revelation until it reaches a person and evokes an affirmative response. This is like saying that there is no light unless it is seen by the human eye, or better, that there is no expression of another personality until I have responded to it. Let us rather say that revelation is an unbroken line of activity from God to man, and that it is both objective and subjective. On the one hand, its origin and going forth does not depend upon man at all, neither upon man's comprehension of it nor his acceptance of it. On the other hand, it is made effective only in man's reception of it.

In recent theological discussions this coming together of God and man in man's experience is called "encounter." Some say there is no revelation except in this encounter. We agree that God's revelation must become

personal, and that revelation is not known at all unless it is existentially known. But we do not forget that God's saving acts exist in history before their benefit becomes effective in men, and that this is actually when the revelation breaks through into history.

At this point, it is important to make clear whether God's revelation is made only in historic acts or whether He also communicates ideas. There are those who deny that He communicates ideas, denying what sometimes is called conceptual or propositional revelation, and thus limiting revelation to acts. But is this not to deny that God speaks or interprets His acts? However, since the acts alone seldom speak clearly for themselves, God must speak. On that "green hill far away," a man died—that is history; that is an act. That He died "to save us all" is an interpretation, a proposition, which the cross itself does not give, and which man's unaided mind does not and cannot conceive; it comes only as a divine revelation, an act of God's love and grace.

The cross was to the Jews only a stumbling block and to the Greeks only foolishness. That it was and is "the power to God" to those who believe is due to the ideas conveying the divine interpretation of the cross. Jesus Himself gave this interpretation in anticipation of the cross. "The Son of man . . . [is come] . . . to give his life as a ransom for many." The apostles testified to it afterwards by inspiration. Paul said, "In whom we have redemption through his blood, even the forgiveness of sins," and at another place, "I delivered unto you . . . that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures."

That the way of salvation seems so self-evident to us as believers is only due to the communication of ideas

which have their source in a speaking God, and which were never known (apart from prophetic forecasts and symbolic sacrifices) until He spoke them in Christ, and inspired them in the apostles and their writings. This is God's once-for-all revelation through Christ and the apostles, deposited for us in the Bible. Ideas are also necessary for any real encounter between persons. Personal self-disclosure, of one man to another, is quite inadequate without words, and such self-disclosure is necessary for real encounter. Ideas are also necessary for any real encounter between man and God.

But the production of the personal revelation of God in the Christian man's experience, as just described above, depends upon the continuing gracious work of the Holy Spirit in illuminating the individual person. God keeps on revealing Himself by the Holy Spirit, on the basis of His once-for-all past revelation in act and word, to those who open their minds and hearts to the total redemptive truth of past salvation history and its interpretation. There is no ground nor necessity for separating from each other, in God's total revelational activity, His historic saving acts, His interpretative words, His illumination of the hearts and minds of persons. As G. W. Bromiley* says, illumination is "an unavoidable implicate of inspiration." If the message of revelation is really from the Holy Spirit, it cannot be received merely by the natural understanding. "Without the Holy Spirit it can be read only on the level of the human letter. What is given by the Spirit must be read in the Spirit." If this is not done, as Bromiley fur-

^{*}The quotation, ideas, and some of the wording of this and several following pages, which owe much to Bromiley, are taken from his essay. "The Church Doctrine of Inspiration," in the volume Revelation and the Bible.

ther says, we fall into the Judaistic use of the Scripture and cannot get its true message.

Like the Jews in II Corinthians 3, who can only read the Old Testament with a veiling over their eyes, since only through Christ can the veil be taken away, so we Christians may read the Bible with a veiling over our eyes, using it only as a textbook of doctrine, ethics, ceremonies, or regulations, making it a legalistic wooden book deprived of its living power, and thus failing to meet Christ in the obedience of faith.

It is Judaistic to abstract the divine nature and authority of the Bible from its human authors and situations, that is, from the whole movement of God's saving work in and through the history of Israel and the church; it is Judaistic to separate the Bible from Jesus Christ as the object of its witness; it is Judaistic to refuse the witness of the living Holy Spirit to Christ in and through the Scripture. This is the letter that kills; only the Spirit makes alive. Only when the veil is removed can we behold the glory of the Lord and be changed into His likeness. II Corinthians 3:18.

To handle the Scripture in any other way is legalistic rationalism, which leads to self-righteousness and self-wisdom. "On the basis of a sound doctrine of inspiration, Biblical study and Biblical theology is always a venture of prayer, humility, and obedience in the Spirit, and not of mere human effort and skill." Luther puts it in this way: "The Bible cannot be mastered by study and talent; you must rely solely on the influx of the Spirit." Conrad Grebel, founder of the Anabaptist-Mennonite Church, put it powerfully when he said, "I believe the Word of God out of grace, not out of human learning."

The church also has its part to play in making the Bible serve its full revelatory purpose. It is in the fellowship of believers, to whom the Holy Spirit is given as a body, that the revelatory character of the Bible is best comprehended, the canon fixed, sound interpretation developed, and obedience secured.

Thus revelation includes among its aspects the historical, the propositional, the Scriptural, the personal, and the illuminational, and must eventuate in an encounter between the self-disclosing, self-giving, redeeming God and sinful needy man. This encounter must result in the obedience of faith. If it does not, man is still in his sin and the goal of revelation is not achieved; and then we must say with John, "The light shineth in the darkness; and the darkness apprehended it not" (ASV).

From what has been said it is clear that an indispensable link in the chain of God's revelational activity is the Bible. To deny that its words carry the message of God is to break the chain; there is then no longer a sure word from the Lord. If we cannot accept the written Scripture as a trustworthy and authoritative communication of God's revelation, we are thrown back on ecclesiasticism, subjectivism, mysticism, or the report of historical experts who by their own rational faculties seek to derive meaning out of the historical acts of God (which are reported only in Scripture and nowhere else).

Since the Bible is indispensable in the chain of revelation, may we then call the Bible revelation? Certainly it is not the only form of revelation, for there is a general though inadequate revelation in created nature and in the conscience of even fallen man, the sinner. Again: shall we say only that it is the record of revelation, and not revelation itself? Certainly it is the record, the only

record, of salvation history and of its trustworthy interpretation. But the Bible is also a necessary integral part of God's revelational activity, as the final agent in presenting this activity as a unified and comprehensive whole. For us, now, it is that indispensable mode of revelation through which redemptive history is made coherent and meaningful.

In the absence of the Scriptural understanding of God's acts we have no unified and authoritative understanding. It has been a major error of liberalism to take the Bible out of the chain of revelation, to deny any real inspiration, and thus to destroy any real authority. It is not enough to accept the Bible as normative only because it reports the apostolic witness in the early church; it must be normative because it brings God's revelation and bears His authority, and not just that of the early church.

Whoever robs us of such a simple faith in the Scripture as the Word of God robs us of the only ground on which we can stand. I speak now not only as a Christian, but as a Mennonite. The Mennonite Church from its origin four centuries ago in Anabaptism has been a church founded upon Jesus Christ as delivered to us in the Scriptures. Indeed, the Mennonite Church may well be called a Biblicistic church (in the good, not the bad sense); it has never been a church of the theologians or of a hierarchy. If we abandon our confidence in the Bible, the Mennonite Church is lost; we will ultimately disappear in the stream of history. We have no other option: we can be a church under the authority of the Bible, or a church under the authority of theologians, or a church under the authority of a hierarchy. Let us make our choice. As for me, mine is made. I want my church now and to the end of its earthly ministry to be a church of the Bible. But I add at once, I want this because I want it to be a church of the historic and living Christ to whom this Bible everlastingly testifies.

III. THE BIBLE AS THE WITNESS TO JESUS CHRIST

In concluding this section on revelation we must speak of Jesus Christ, who is the center of Scripture, and who is Himself, as no book can ever be, the supreme, final, and complete revelation of God to men. This is the claim of Christ Himself: "I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me"; and "He that hath seen me hath seen the Father." It is the testimony of the New Testament generally: "In him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily"; "In . . . [him] are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge." And John said, "No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath . . . [revealed] him."

Christ Himself is the Saviour, the object of faith, the center of our life in God. As this He is also the central content of Scripture. Even the Old Testament, Jesus said, testifies of Him. "Ye search the scriptures" and ye do well, for "they are they which testify of me." And did He not expound to the disciples on the road to Emmaus "in all the scriptures the things concerning himself"? As Zwingli put it, in the Bible "Christ stands before you with open arms, inviting you and saying, 'Come unto me.'" Unless we come to Him, we have not received the revelation of God in any true sense.

Even the very expression "the word of God" in the New Testament means the saving message of God in Christ (67 out of the 70 times it appears, as J. C. Wenger has shown elsewhere); it does not mean the Scriptures as we commonly call it. When John therefore calls Jesus the Word, he means to say that Jesus is the supreme embodiment of God's saving message to man. In this sense the New Testament, in bringing Christ to us, contains God's Word. Luther said this in the striking metaphor: "It is the crib in which Christ is laid." "Christ is the full revelation of God because He gathers up in Himself all that was previously made known of the will and purpose of God, fulfills it and completes it," full of grace and truth. We are certainly not saved by history, nor by the Bible, but by receiving by faith the crucified, risen, and ever-living Lord Jesus Christ, who was, and is, and ever shall be.

Yet it is still possible to accept the Bible with the mind and not find Christ in it, like the learned teachers of Scripture of His day, who believed fully in Scriptural revelation and inspiration, to whom He said, "Ye search the scriptures," but "ye will not come to me." We may search the Scriptures as we will to find texts to support our private interpretations, to bolster our pet systems, to build our legalistic regulations, to condemn our theological enemies, and yet not find Christ or obey Him or His words. We may drown in a sea of Scripture texts and Scripture verses, and yet not meet the Lord of Scripture Himself nor hear His gentle voice saying, "Follow me."

In other words, it is possible to profess very piously to be Biblical and yet to miss the central meaning of the Bible, to be mightily concerned about tithes and mint and cummin and yet to miss the weightier matters of the Word. We are Biblical only if our confession, our teaching, our theology, are controlled completely by the great central message of the Bible, and by this we mean centrally the New Testament, where Christ is fully presented. Hence the New Testament becomes the norm of Scripture because of Christ; we see even the Old Testament through Christ.

In concluding this study of the meaning of revelation, may I raise my voice against the unnecessary, unprofitable, and dangerous separation of what belongs inseparably together in the idea of revelation: objective and subjective, propositional and existential, historical and Scriptural, personal and Scriptural, revelation and witness to revelation, "is the Word of God" and "contains the Word of God." And then let us admit that we cannot fully comprehend by our finite minds the mystery of the self-disclosure of the transcendent infinite God. Let us humbly receive of His grace, and grace upon grace.

IV. THE MEANING OF INSPIRATION

There remains the second part of the subject, Biblical inspiration. Already important references to inspiration have been made, but it now remains to set forth its full meaning.

Inspiration is the term used to state God's relation to Scripture. "All scripture is inspired by God," says Paul (the original means God-breathed), and is profitable for making the man of God complete. And Peter says, "Holy men of old spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost." Both referred to the Old Testament writings. The writer of Hebrews tells us, evidently referring to the same Scriptures, that "God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the

fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son."

The Old Testament prophets knew when they were receiving a word from the Lord, and they often put a "Thus saith the Lord" before the words of their own mouths. God said to Jeremiah, "Behold, I have put my words in thy mouth"; and to Ezekiel He said, "Thou shalt speak my words unto them." While not every portion of Scripture expressly asserts its own inspiration, it is clear that the Scriptures of the Old Testament were understood by the Jews, by Christ and the apostles, and by the early church to claim divine inspiration. We agree in this understanding and confess this inspiration. It is clear that the apostles also believed that they spoke and wrote with the authority of Christ and the Spirit. The early church certainly understood it so. In fact, the basic criterion for the canonization of Scripture books, i.e., for including them in the list of inspired books, was apostolicity.

When we examine the testimony of Scripture, we find no explanation as to the method of inspiration, and no detailed description of its character. The purpose of inspiration is clear—it is to guarantee the authority and profit of Scripture. The "God-breathed" Scriptures of II Timothy 3:16 are "profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly . . . [equipped] unto all good works." Their source is in God (He breathes them out); the profit is for the man who accepts them as from God.

It is clear, however, that in the production of Scripture God and man co-operated. The Holy Spirit moved; men spoke. There is thus both a divine and a human

side to inspiration, which has often been compared to the divine and human aspects of the nature of Christ.

The Biblical writings manifest so clearly the characteristics and traits of their human writers, and their relation to the historical times and cultural settings in which they were written is so clear, that divine dictation or mechanical inspiration, shutting out human participation, is impossible. God used men's minds, but those minds were normally active, and were not in a quiescent trance. How He used them we cannot say; but how men used their minds in their writing is clear, and it becomes a fascinating and most profitable study to trace all that went into the human writing of Scriptures. So much is added to our understanding of it thereby. This is what Bible students do in exegesis.

However, in the course of the history of the church men have not been content with the simple statement of divine inspiration, authority, and profitableness, but have sought to penetrate the very mystery of God's working in inspiration; at least some theologians have done so. In so doing, they have sometimes overstressed the divine and neglected the human, and sometimes the opposite. Many of their attempted descriptions are therefore unsatisfactory. I would prefer to stand reverently before the Scripture with an open heart and mind and receive it as of full divine authority, and not seek to specify beyond that which the Scripture itself specifies. Why do we men want to make things plainer than God does? A precise description of inspiration is not necessary to a saving faith and obedience.

But questions are often asked about details in inspiration, and sometimes misunderstandings and polemics result. Shall we speak of verbal inspiration? It is hard to see how there could be any inspiration except in the words. There are no such things as disembodied thoughts. The great modern Scottish theologian John Baillie says that inspiration must be verbal. But the term "verbal" carries for many a connotation of mechanical dictation; so why insist upon using it?

Again, shall we speak of plenary inspiration? All the Scripture is inspired, if this is what plenary inspiration is intended to assert. But few ordinary people know what the word "plenary" means, and it too has been twisted into misunderstanding. It certainly does not mean that all parts of Scripture are equally valuable for spiritual life. We all have our own private list of those portions of Scripture which speak most powerfully to us personally, a list which no doubt should be enlarged; and the church well knows by experience what Scriptures are most profitable for the work of the Gospel, even though all Scripture is inspired.

A third point of trouble comes from confusing revelation and inspiration. Not all the contents of Scripture were given by revelation—for we know that some of the writers directly cite sources which they used; Luke says he studied many accounts of the life of Christ which came from eyewitnesses, and he certainly used them. This does not mean, to be sure, that such materials were not helpful in the total revelatory function of Luke's Gospel. Inspiration refers to the communication of God's message in Scripture; revelation refers to its content. All Scripture is inspired, though not all its content is revealed. But by inspiration the nonrevelational material is made a reliable report.

A fourth point of confusion and distortion arises

when men press the Scripture into service for purposes for which there is no indicated intention in Scripture itself. We remember that II Timothy 3:16 says Scripture is inspired and profitable for a number of spiritual things. Let us stop with Paul's list, and not add further to the list. We must draw our doctrine of inspiration from the phenomena of Scripture itself, and not force upon Scripture our own preconceived notions.

Some want to claim that since God is perfect, He must have inspired a Scripture that is perfect in grammar and in literary style, equally clear and perfectly understandable throughout, and able to fit perfectly into modern scientific concepts and modern criteria of historical precision. The first half of this claim is rendered invalid by any candid examination of the original language of Scripture itself; the second also. But a moment's reflection on the second claim will reveal also its absurdity and danger in view of the need that the Bible, the bearer of the message of salvation, must speak to men in all ages and cultures, prescientific and postscientific, primitive in culture and advanced. But the nonscientific character of the Scripture has no bearing on its reliability.

On the other hand, many supposed errors in Scripture as claimed by critics and unbelievers have been proved by archaeology and sound critical research not to be errors after all. Let us avoid an exaggerated drawing out of the concept of inspiration into unfounded hyper-claims. Let us not claim what the Scriptures themselves do not claim. Above all, let us not stake our faith on a rationalistic demand for a proof of logical perfection or scientific inerrancy. How pathetic to hear a Christian say, "If you can prove one error in Scrip-

ture, my faith is gone." Our faith is in Christ, unshaken by incidental so-called errors which cannot at the moment be rationally refuted. The Christian can go forward on his pilgrimage to glory without all the answers to the details of the critics, because "the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." Inspiration is not based upon inerrancy of fact; on the contrary, the right concept of inerrancy depends on the right understanding of inspiration, as well as upon a candid examination of the phenomena of Scripture itself.

That the Scriptures cannot be broken, that the Word of God will perform that unto which God sends it forth, that it makes men wise unto salvation, that it will never pass away, that it is infallible in communicating God's truth, this is the Bible's own claim, and this we confess. The Bible is the infallible authority for faith and life. Here we part company with all liberalism, modernism, and any neo-orthodoxy which denies to the Bible normative character. But here we also part company with the hyper-fundamentalists and dispensationalists. Our Bible is the wholly adequate book of life in Christ and God, this fully and nothing else. Our ancient Dordrecht confession of faith does not claim more. We do not need to claim more today.

Lastly, for the book of life to accomplish its purpose it must be obeyed with the obedience of faith, an obedience which takes the Christ of the Scriptures as Saviour and Lord, and leaves the vain seeking after curiosities and genealogies as unprofitable. Such obedience seeks to receive power for witnessing to the ends of the earth as Jesus commissioned His apostles in Acts 1:8. The Bible is not something to be argued about; it is to

be accepted and obeyed. Nor need we labor furiously to defend it from all sorts of charges, as though, unless we can rationally convince the opponents, there is no hope for the Bible to survive. Do we not believe that the Word of God is life-giving, that it cannot be broken, that its truth is indestructible, that though heaven and earth shall pass away, it shall not pass away?

Let us then joyfully testify to the Christ of whom the Scriptures testify. Let us proclaim His salvation. Let us use the full Bible for the admonition of the saints. And let us as a church and as individuals live in such obedience to Christ and His Word that Biblical revelation and inspiration are vindicated by us.

About the Author

Harold S. Bender is Dean and Professor of Church History in Goshen College Biblical Seminary. He is a graduate of both Garrett Biblical Institute and Princeton Theological Seminary, and holds a Th.D. degree from Heidelberg University in Germany. He has served as president of the American Society of Church History and of the Society for Reformation Research. He is the author of Conrad Grebel and The Anabaptist Vision, and editor of the Mennonite Encyclopedia and the Mennonite Quarterly Review. He is chairman of the Historical and Research Committee and the Peace Problems Committee of the Mennonite General Conference, and has participated actively in many other phases of the life of his denomination. He is since 1952 president of the Mennonite World Conference.

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